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ABSTRACT

There are at least four reasons why the sterectype of Henry David Thoreau as an ascetic and a stoic have been perpetuated: (1) Emerson, in his eulogy of Thoreau, emphasized these qualities by saying, "Few lives contain so many renunciations...he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun... He had no temptaticns to fight against--no appetites, no passions, no taste for elegant trifles.... He never had a vice in his life." (2) modern scholars approach Thoreau as a Transcendentalist, and although Thoreau was profoundly influenced by the philosophy, to think of him in only those terms is to conceive of him as one who abjured the physical world and dwelt in the world of ideas. (3) Thoreau was undoubtedly influenced by some of the Puritan ideas. (4) Thoreau lived in the heart of the Victorian age, and we are prone to see him as a Victorian. However, Thoreau, unlike Emerson, was sensuous, as evidenced by virtually all of his writings. He is constantly making use of all of the senses, not only in descriptive passages but also in his most theoretical passages. Since our age is more sensually oriented, Thoreau's writings are more appealing than Emerson's philosophical abstractions. (LL)

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THOREAU, SENSUOUS TRANSCENDENTALIST

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by

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When Henry David Thoreau wrote his well-known essay on "Walking," he began it by saying, "I wish to speak a word for . . . wildness. . . .I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one." I would like to speak a word for a sort of wildness in Thoreau, and if I make an extreme statement, it is so I may make an emphatic one.

The proverbial man in the street, when he thinks of Henry David Thoreau, tends to see him as a cold, unemotional intellectual, a man who preferred saying "No" to saying "Yes," a man who retreated from mankind and the world. There are at least four good reasons why that stereotype has become so impressed on the popular mind.

(1) When Ralph Waldo Emerson prepared a eulogy to read at Thoreau's funeral on May 9, 1862, he emphasized the stoic and ascetic qualities of his friend. "Few lives contain so many renunciations," he said. "He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. . . .He had no temptations to fight against,--no appetites, no passions, no taste for elegant trifles. . . .He never had a vice in his life." It mattered little that Henry's mother and sister, Emerson's son Edward, and many others who knew Thoreau well personally disagreed strongly with Emerson's opinion; the fact that his essay has been and perhaps even still is the most widely read study of Thoreau served to create an image that has been dominant in the mind of the reading public ever since.

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(2) Although modern scholars have taken an entirely different approach from Emerson's to Thoreau, the end result has been much the same. They have looked upon Thoreau as a Transcendentalist. While there is some question as to how much of a stoic or an ascetic Thoreau was at heart, I think there is no question at all that Thoreau was very much a Transcendentalist and profoundly influenced by the philosophy of the movement. It is his Transcendental idealism, his courage to stand up for a principle, his willingness to sacrifice material gains to spiritual, to go to jail rather than go against his Transcendental insight, that are the characteristics that have made him so appealing to so many of us in these our troublous, un-Transcendental days.

But paradoxically to approach Thoreau as a Transcendentalist, in one way at least, has served but to reenforce his image as an ascetic and stoic. A Transcendentalist, by definition, is one who "transcends the senses," or, as Merriam-Webster spells it out, one who "asserts the primacy of the spiritual and transcendental over the material and empirical." Thus those who think of Thoreau as primarily a Transcendentalist tend also to think of him as one who abjured the physical world and dwelt in the world of ideas.

(3) It is inevitable that we look upon Thoreau as a Puritan. Granted the hey-day of Puritanism was over by Thoreau's nineteenth century but a great deal of the impact was still there. As we all well know, Thoreau's friend and contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne complained in his "Custon House" essay of his Puritan ancestors, "Strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine." Even though Thoreau more forcefully than Hawthorne rejected many of the views of his Puritan ancestors, he too would readily have admitted their impact. As Harold Goddard has said, all the American Transcendentalists were "Puritans to the core." It is not surprising therefore that since we tend to think of the Puritans themselves as cold and austere, we tend to think of Thoreau as cold and austere too.

(4) And finally, because Thoreau lived in the mid-nineteenth century, in the heart of the Victorian age, we are quite naturally prone to see him as a Victorian. The age of Victoria was a period of prudishness, of moral censorship, of repression of the senses; ergo, we say, Thoreau must have been prudish, censorious, and repressed. Thoreau, like any great individualist, was sturdy and independent enough to transcend some of the conventionalities of his time, but one does not have to read far in him to realize that Victorianism did have its impact upon him. Thus once again the sterectype of Thoreau as cold and emotionless has been reenforced.

But there is another side of Thoreau that I would like to emphasize because I think it is vital both to an understanding of the man and of his wide appeal today. Even though there may have been ascetic and stoic qualities in Thoreau's character as Emerson emphasized; even though there was unquestionably, as the students of Transcendentalism have stressed, an idealistic, almost other-worldly element in his personality; and even though there were strong Puritan and Victorian elements in his character; there was nonetheless a strong element of sensuousness in both his personality and his writing. We do not ordinarily think of ascetics or stoics or Transcendentalists or Puritans or Victorians as markedly sensuous, but if we examine Thoreau's life and writings closely I do not think we can avoid the conclusion that he was essentially a sensuous person and one of the distinctive qualities of his writings, particularly when we compare it with that of his contemporaries, is its sensuousness. Even Thoreau himself was I believe surprised and no little disturbed by his sensuousness. At times he tried to suppress it or at least cover it over. But so compulsive was his sensuousness that despite his attempts to subdue or check it, it kept popping out in all directions.

Had we not been blinded by our preconceived notions of Thoreau, I think we would have much more readily recognized this sensuous side of Thoreau's nature. Certainly once we start looking for it, we can see it in virtually all of his writings. He is constantly making use of his senses, not just one sense, but all

five. If we read his Journals, we find it a little more obvious, for he was less reticent in their privacy. "My body is all sentient," he said at one point. Or, again, "See, hear, smell, taste, etc., while these senses are fresh and pure." Or, "A man should feed his senses with the best that the land affords." And these are only a few of many such statements in his Journal.

We rarely find such explicit glorification of the life of the senses in his public works. His Victorian reticence prevented that. But it is implicit on virtually every page. Only a man who reveled in his senses could write such a passage as this chosen virtually at random from Walden:

> As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bull-frogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes.

And that sensuousness comes through not only in such descriptive passages as that I have just given, but also in his most theoretical passages. For example, let us look at one of the most famous philosophical passages from Walden:

> If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes, or even insanity, it may lead him; and yet that way, as he grows more resolute and faithful his road lies. The faintest assured objection which one healthy man feels will at length prevail over the arguments and customs

> of mankind. No man ever followed his genius till it misled him. . . If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal,--that is your success.

Once again the senses shine through in nearly every word. In contrast let me read an equally famous passage from Emerson's contemporaneous "Self-Reliance" on exactly the same theme and note the difference:

> Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being.

There is hardly a sensory word in the entire passage. Were Emerson blind and deaf and, indeed, lacking all his senses, he would have had no difficulty writing those sentences. But in Thoreau's writings, the senses pulsate through every line. We hear, see, smell, taste, and feel every passage of his we read. Bradford Torrey once aptly described Thoreau as "a pretty stoical sort of epicurean," but epicurean he was, more than stoic.

Thoreau was not a sensualist. His senses were so attuned that he did not need gross stimulation. Like Emily Dickinson--and I have always suspected that Miss Dickinson had Thoreau at least partially in mind when she wrote the poem, "inebriate of air" was he and "debauchee of dew." As Clifton Fadiman once jokingly but nonetheless perceptively remarked, Henry Thoreau could get more out of ten minutes with a chickadee than most men could out of a whole night with Cleopatra. Burr Shafer, in one of that delightful series of "Through History with J. Wesley Smith" cartoons that used to run in the old Saturday Review once depicted a fancy grocer instructing his clerk to "Send this champagne and caviar to Mr. Henry David Thoreau at Walden, Massachusetts. Just be sure to ship it in a plain wrapper." Thoreau was

a gourmet at heart, but he did not need cherries jubilee or crepes suzette to stimulate a jaded appetite. He took his water straight. His friend Ellery Channing was so intrigued by Thoreau's keeness of taste (On their walks together Channing noticed that Thoreau was forever tasting--and exulting in--the flavor of buds and leaves and twigs and grasses and berries and fruits.) that he said Thoreau had an "edible religion." We could say equally well that Thoreau had a religion of the ear, the eye, the nose and the touch.

I think we need not lament that Thoreau's sensuousness was somewhat repressed by such forces as Puritanism and Victorianism. The line between sensuousness and sensuality is easily crossed. The gourmet all too easily degenerates into the gourmand. If I may indulge in a bit of synesthesia, I am talking of gourmets of touch, sight, smell, and hearing as well as taste. Thoreau was a gourmet of all five senses, but he kept from ever straying over the line into self-indulgence. Mrs. Pat Campbell once admonished that great Puritan and Victorian vegetarian George Bernard Shaw, "Bertie [as she called him], if you should ever eat a beefsteak, lord help every woman in Britain." I would hate to think of Henry Thoreau as the American Casanova. It is not unlikely that it was the forces of Puritanism and Victorianism that kept him from becoming one. What is more, perhaps it is not too much to claim that possibly out of the tensions created by Thoreau's paradoxical situation grew the drives that impelled him to his writing.

But enough of such speculations. To return to my central theme: Many wonder what has caused Thoreau's star to rise so rapidly in recent years and, conversely, what has caused his friend Emerson's to wane. Certainly the ideas of the two men are very much the same; their messages are almost identical. Yet Emerson was looked upon as the spokesman for the nineteenth century, while Thoreau is that of the twentieth. Why?

The answer lies, I believe, not in any difference in their ideas, for their ideas are much the same. The real difference is in their styles. Emerson himself

recognized this difference and in the privacy of his own journal said:

> In reading Henry Thoreau's journal, I am very sensible of the vigour of his constitution. That oaken strength which I noted whenever he walked, or worked, or surveyed wood-lots, the same unhesitating hand with which a field-labourer accosts a piece of work, which I should shun as a waste of strength, Henry shows in his literary task. He has muscle, and ventures on and performs feats which I am forced to decline. In reading him I find the same thought, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes a step beyond, and illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy generality.

Emerson wrote primarily in philosophical abstractions and soared to popularity in an age when such abstractions were held in high esteem. Our age is more down to earth. We are much more sensuous. And thus we treasure the more sensuous writings of Henry Thoreau. The tastes of future generations may--indeed, probably will--change. Abstraction may return in favor and with its return undoubtedly the popularity of Emerson will return. But for today it is Thoreau who speaks to us most meaningfully.